



At a time when there is much discussion about landscape as art, the *Endless Column Complex* by Romanian sculptor Constantine Brancusi (1876–1957) holds particular significance for the field of landscape architecture. Completed in 1938, the tripartite ensemble—composed of the *Endless Column*, a 30-meter high column of zinc and brass-clad, cast-iron modules, and two stone monuments, the *Gate of the Kiss* and the *Table of Silence*—was conceived as a tribute to young Romanian soldiers who died defending the town of Târgu-Jiu against German forces during World War I. Its location marks the place along the River Jiu where the young men made their sacrifice and draws out from there as a processional way that continues through the town for nearly two kilometers. It is a sublime creation that suggests the journey from this life to the next, with a sequence of evocative, abstracted monuments placed within the fabric of everyday civic life. Com-

# RECLAIMING SACRED SPACE

## LANDSCAPING CONSTANTINE BRANCUSI'S *ENDLESS COLUMN COMPLEX*

memorating a profoundly heroic and tragic moment in the history of Târgu-Jiu and Romania as a nation, this seminal work of modern art is regarded as one of the first and most successful public monuments of the twentieth century.

Upon its completion, the ensemble defined a sacred space that stretched from the river floodplain to a haymarket on the edge of town, the monuments punctuating a serene landscape of gently rolling hills, cultivated fields, and farmhouses built of wood and stone, embraced by the snow-capped Carpathians visible in the distance.

Since then, however, the ensemble has lost a substantial amount of its presence, yielding to visual clutter and landscape intrusions as the town continues to expand. The processional way connecting the monuments, known as the Avenue of Heroes, has become a major thoroughfare, now bisected by other streets and lined with Soviet-era buildings, while the sculptures themselves have been isolated from each other. The *Table of Silence* and the *Gate of the Kiss* are located in the Park of the Gate, which bustles with activity throughout the year. The Park of the Column, which is much less used, abuts a school, a relatively tall and grim clothing factory, houses, and, further along the road to Bucharest, army barracks.





Following restoration of the sculptural elements in 2000 (see page 37), our team of landscape architects from the Laurie Olin Partnership set out to restore the dignity and serenity the work possessed prior to World War II. While it would be impossible to re-create the landscape of Brancusi's day, we could subtly alter the immediate surroundings of the ensemble in such a way that its power could be felt despite a plethora of visual and aural distractions.

**PARK OF THE GATE:  
TABLE OF SILENCE, ALLÉE OF STOOLS, AND GATE OF THE KISS**

The table with its 12 vacant stools originally stood on the bank of the River Jiu. However, the relationship between the sculpture and the river has since been visually and physically obscured by a tall, grassy embankment installed as part of a flood control measure when the river was dammed. The embankment itself was planted with black poplars while a visually distracting water feature located at its base competed for attention. Moreover, low hedges had been planted around the sculpture, further diminishing its presence.

Our goal was to create a calm, reflective, and sacred space in which the table could sit quietly apart from the park, making it a destination rather than a through route. To do this, we removed all of the hedges, opting instead for a single, soft-edged ellipse of crushed stone around the table and stools, beyond which we planted a grove of weeping willows, which, with their long hanging branches that move with the gentlest breeze, are associated with mourning and water. In time, the willows will grow together to form a loosely defined and separate space from the surrounding park.

The Allée of the Stools—a 160-meter-long path lined with 15 stools on each side—which connects the *Table of Silence* with the *Gate of the Kiss*, is lined with horse chestnuts. Although they dramatically framed the space, the trees had grown in a way that shaded the stools, placing them in shadow for much of the day. Moreover, small, low clipped hedges had been planted around the stools, making them all but invisible in the surrounding visual clutter. The allée was also crossed by three paths. Two were important park circulation routes, but one, which crossed the allée between the gate and the stools, was particularly intrusive and of lesser importance for pedestrian movement. Beyond the allée, on either side, were dark areas of woodland and, close to the gate, a children's playground. The allée, originally of bare earth, had been paved in the Ceausescu era with crude concrete containing a decorative pattern and was in very poor condition.

To allow the stools to be clearly seen and to return the ensemble to its



UNLESS NOTED, DRAWINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OLIN PARTNERSHIP



**OPENING SPREAD: HEDGES THAT ONCE OBSCURED THE *TABLE OF SILENCE* HAVE BEEN REPLACED WITH AN ELLIPSE OF CRUSHED STONE AND WILLOWS. DURING THE CEAUCESCU ERA, HEDGES WERE ALSO PLANTED AROUND THE TRIOS OF STOOLS LINING THE ALLÉE, ABOVE, MAKING THEM ALL BUT INVISIBLE. THE ALLÉE ITSELF, ORIGINALLY OF BARE EARTH, WAS ALSO COVERED WITH CONCRETE, WHICH HAD DETERIORATED CONSIDERABLY. THE HEDGES HAVE SINCE BEEN REMOVED AND SOFT BANDS OF SHADE-TOLERANT SHRUBS HAVE BEEN PLANTED AT A DISTANCE TO BLOCK VISUAL CLUTTER, LEFT. THE PATHWAY ITSELF HAS BEEN REPAVED WITH THE SAME CRUSHED STONE THAT NOW SURROUNDS THE *TABLE OF SILENCE*.**

more rural character, the hedges were removed and background distractions carefully screened by planting soft bands of shade-tolerant shrubs behind the stools in three rows of increasing height. The species were chosen to provide subtly varying seasonal colors and textures. For the walking surface, the same crushed stone that was used around the table was extended along the allée and edged with a matching colored curb. Carefully proportioned recesses of crushed stone frame each group of three stools, with the remaining areas planted with grass.

Much thought and debate went into the choice of material for the paths. Aside from practical considerations of maintenance, the discussion focused on finding a material that was robust and yet not too sophisticated. We wanted to respond to the primal quality of the work by choosing a material that would reflect light up to the underside of the canopy, yet one that did not have an insistent pattern. After viewing many samples of crushed stone, we opted for the same stone from which the stools were made for all paths within the two parks associated with the ensemble.



NOW FREE OF SUFFOCATING HEDGES AND OTHER VISUAL DISTRACTIONS, THE *TABLE OF SILENCE*, ABOVE, COMMANDS ITS LANDSCAPE. THE TABLE PRIOR TO RESTORATION AND RELANDSCAPING, RIGHT.



## RESTORING THE *ENDLESS COLUMN* COMPLEX

The *Endless Column* Complex by famed Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) has been hailed as one of the great works of twentieth-century open-air art. Commissioned by the Women's League of Gorj to honor the soldiers who had defended Târgu-Jiu against a German force in 1916, the tripartite ensemble, erected in 1934, is composed of the *Endless Column*, a 30-meter-high column of zinc and brass-clad, cast-iron modules—15 full and two half—threaded onto a steel spine, and two travertine monuments, the *Gate of the Kiss* and the *Table of Silence*.

Despite the ensemble's artistic importance, decades of exposure to the elements and poor maintenance during the Communist era had taken their toll on the sculptures, which by the mid-1990s were in dire need of conservation. Following the inclusion of the *Endless Column* on WMF's 1996 list of *100 Most Endangered Sites*, WMF and the Romanian Government established a partnership with the World Bank to finance the restoration of all three sculptures.

Although the column's modules had been replated twice since its construction, inspection of the modules revealed that while they were in generally excellent condition, the original surface had failed completely in a number of areas, revealing a rusting substrate. In June 1999, WMF brought together 32 leading architects, engineers, conservators, and Romanian cultural officials to determine the best methods to restore the column. Collectively, they decided to conserve rather than replace the existing spine, and to refinish the modules. Each module was cleaned, repaired—although pitting and small voids original to the cast-iron surface were not filled in—and replated with a polished medium-yellow bronze finish that closely resembles the original. Conservation of the column was completed in the fall of 2000. The travertine sculptures—the *Table of Silence* and its 12 stools, the *Gate of the Kiss*, and the stools lining the Allée—were cleaned of graffiti and biological growth and repaired. Some of the joints between the blocks of stone were fractured, probably due to some small structural movements within the monument. Conservation of the stone monuments was completed in 2004.



Finally the horse chestnuts were carefully pruned to filter more light down to the stools. Continued annual pruning will ensure that there is sufficient light during the day. For nighttime illumination, lights were placed high within the foliage of the trees suspended from discreet poles placed apart from the stools between the tree trunks.

### THE PARK OF THE COLUMN

Originally the site of a hay market outside the town, the Park of the Column today is a long triangular space with roads on each side. Although the column dominates the space around, the park was badly defined and in poor condition. In addition most views of the column invariably had come to have buildings in the background, which detract from the idea of the column's connection with the infinite.

The column, and in particular its connection to the sky, is the culmination of the procession from the river. To reinforce this connection, a variety of large and small trees have been planted at a distance of approximately one and a half times the height of the column to form a seasonally changing backdrop and to screen out the surrounding buildings. Over time, these small trees will grow together to form a woodland around the column, which is open to the axis to the northwest, to provide a view of the distant Carpathian Mountains. When the trees mature, they will frame the column in such a way that it will once again be seen against the vast horizon, distant mountains, and sky.

The earth has been carefully shaped so that the column appears to rise from a high point. As in the Park of the Gate, crushed stone has been used for paths which circumnavigate the column so that visitors see it at a distance and without any adjacent element against which to judge its scale. Paths are located on the periphery in the shade of this woodland edge. The approach to the column is via mown grass paths. The base of the column is a simple circle of crushed stone and the surrounding ground is planted as a native wildflower meadow that in full bloom should be about half a meter in height.



DAN CALUGARU

**THE NEWLY RESTORED GATE OF THE KISS, ABOVE, AT NIGHT. A SKETCH BY LAURIE OLIN, BELOW, SHOWS THE LANDSCAPING POTENTIAL OF THE AVENUE OF HEROES, WHICH NOW SEPARATES THE ENDLESS COLUMN FROM THE TWO TRAVERTINE ELEMENTS AND WHICH IS LINED WITH UNSYMPATHETIC ARCHITECTURE.**

Benches are located along the paths around the perimeter of the clearing and park. Beyond the column to the east, where the park narrows, is a lawn of mown grass for playing and picnicking. The intent is to make this an informal recreational space for visitors and residents alike, one that relieves pressure for recreation and other park activities from the area around the column and which also affords long views toward the sculpture. Within the trees are planned public facilities including bathrooms, a café, a children's playground, and a security and maintenance office.

### **AVENUE OF THE HEROES**

With the exception of a handsome orthodox church that is located in the center of the thoroughfare approximately half way between the two parks, the Avenue of the Heroes is a street that has little to distinguish it from other streets in the town. Between the Park of the Gate and the church, the street is dominated by modern concrete buildings erected during the later years of Ceausescu's regime. These intrude on the more human scale of the older buildings and on the overall character of the street itself. The avenue is further interrupted by a large open swath of municipal gardens, with roads on either side approximately one third of the way between the park and the church. This strong axial open space and its bombastic buildings distracts from the ensemble's processional axis. The *Endless Column* becomes visible just after passing the church, at which point the street takes on a more rural and coherent character reminiscent of Brancusi's day with one and two story houses with gardens amid traditional fences. This calm approach to the climax of the sequence created by Brancusi is rudely interrupted, however, by railroad tracks and occasional commuter and freight trains. Throughout the length of the street, particularly between the Park of the Gate and the church, automobile traffic detracts from the experience.

We believe that the street should have a distinctive character, with locally available basalt blocks, currently installed around the church, extended throughout the length of the street. To provide a more generous and attractive space for pedestrians, we



Winter, Bucharest. After planting the Avenue of the Heroes



**WHILE IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO RESTORE THE RURAL CHARACTER OF THE *ENDLESS COLUMN* COMPLEX, ONCE NEW LANDSCAPING REACHES MATURITY VISITORS WILL BE ABLE TO VIEW THE MONUMENTS WITHOUT THE VISUAL CLUTTER OF THE MODERN WORLD.**

have proposed that the sidewalks be widened and that vehicular access be managed so that only vehicles that need to access the street are allowed. We also suggested planting trees on either side of the avenue to give the street a more sympathetic and humane character. This will also provide a consistently attractive edge and reinforce the ensemble's primary axis by providing a "green" link between the two parks.

Beyond this, Mihai Radu of Mihai Radu Architects has completed an urban masterplan for the immediate surrounding area that proposes new buildings and uses that are consistent with the character of the Avenue of the Heroes.

In particular, at the end of the Avenue of the Heroes on the north side, a site has been chosen for a museum and interpretative center that will allow a visitor to learn more about Brancusi, his work, and in particular, the ensemble, and the history of Târgu-Jiu.

While we cannot turn back the clock to an earlier era, the landscape design for this ensemble of abstract sculptures by Brancusi, which was originally placed in a rural setting, allows visitors to view them quietly and without the intrusion of the modern context. The design of the landscape has been an exercise in editing this context and clarifying the situation to allow Brancusi's work to dominate and once again be experienced as the coherent, powerful, and spiritual ensemble the artist envisioned. ■